

Wet or Dry ?

By STEPHEN LEACOCK

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THERE can be little doubt that all of North America—or all of it that lies between the Mexicans and the Esquimaux—is going dry. In the United States a few more legislative votes need but be passed and there will be effected an Amendment to the Constitution making the whole republic bone dry. From this there is no return. The door of the beer cellar is locked and the key thrown away. In Canada eight provinces are at the actual moment dry, and the remaining one, Quebec, dries up, unless help is brought to it, early in the spring. The legislation in Canada is, it is true, largely war legislation and requires a further vote to make it final. But there is no sign or organized opposition, outside of the interested trades, no protests from the public, no delegations to Ottawa, no memorials from our learned societies.

There is every prospect that we are about to go dry and stay dry. The moment is therefore fitting for one who thinks that we are making a sad error to voice a few words of regret.

To my mind the strange thing about the prohibition movement is the queer psychology at the back of it. Few people really want it. But nobody cares to say so. Politicians wait in vain for the sign that is not given. Judges on the bench hand out reluctant sentences, wondering what they will do when the stock of wine in their own cellars is exhausted. Lawyers, doctors, professors and merchants sit tamely by awaiting the extinction of their private comfort. The working man watches the vanishing of his glass of beer and wishes that he was a man of influence with power to protest. The man of influence wishes that he were but a plain working man and might utter a protest without fear of injury to his interests. Nor is there, so far as I am aware, a single one of the clergy to stand up and preach a sermon on the wedding feast at Cana of Galilee.

Drunkenness is, of course, a very terrible thing. It has blotted out many a bright young life. It has slowly broken many a vigorous brain down to drivelling senility. It is a fruitful

source of crime. It has desolated many a home. It has done, in short, all the things that are graphically depicted upon the lantern slides of the "temperance" lecturer.

But drunkenness is not here the point. The drunkard, after all, important though he is, does not fill the whole sky. It is a pity to destroy the comfort of the home and amenity of social life for the sake of so small and so worthless a fraction of humanity: the more so as the drunkard, under prohibition, is apt merely to convert himself into a criminal, drinking illicit poison in place of honest beer and raving himself to ruin all the quicker.

The point that few people seem to care to dwell upon is, in the present crisis, the comfort and pleasure to be found in the ordinary and rational use of beer and wine and spirits such as is made of them by ninety-nine out of every hundred people who use them. This cannot be measured in any scientific fashion, or submitted to the proof of a formula. It is a matter of experience. Those who have never had it are not qualified to speak. But there are countless thousands of people whose private opinion, if they would only speak it out, is that of all the minor comforts of life from the cradle to the grave, beer and tobacco are easily first.

There has grown up in this matter a sort of conspiracy of silence. Nobody seems willing to bear witness to how widely diffused is the habit of normal wholesome drinking, and of the great benefits to be derived from it. The university where I have worked for nearly twenty years contains in its faculties a great number of scholarly, industrious men whose life work cannot be derided or despised even by the salaried agitator of a prohibitionist society. Yet the great majority of them "drink". I use that awful word in the full gloomy sense given to it by the teetotaler. I mean that if you ask these men to dinner and offer them a glass of wine, they will take it. Some will take two. I have even seen them take Scotch and soda. During these same years I have been privileged to know a great many of the leading lawyers of Montreal, whose brains and energy and service to the community I cannot too much admire. If there are any of them who do not "drink," I can only say I have not seen them. I can bear the same dreadful testimony on behalf of my friends who are doctors: and the same, and even more emphatic on behalf of all the painters, artists and literary men with whom I have had the good fortune to be very closely associated. Of the clergy, I cannot speak. But in days more cheerful than the present gloomy times, there were at least those of them who thought a glass of port no every dreadful sin.

And conversely, I can say with all conviction that I have never seen drunken professors lecturing to inebriated students, or tipsy judges listening to boozy lawyers, or artists in delirium

tremens painting the portrait of intoxicated senators. Moreover, among the class of people of whom I speak, the conception of how to make merry at a christening or a wedding or a banquet or at the conclusion of peace, or of any such poor occasions of happiness that mark the milestones in the pilgrimage of life, was exactly the same—I say it in all reverence—as that shown by Jesus Christ at the wedding feast of Cana of Galilee.

But these people, one might object, are but a class and a small one at that. What about the ordinary working man? Surely he is not to be sacrificed for the sake of the leisure hours of the intellectual classes! But here, so it seems to me, is where the strongest argument against prohibition comes in. We live in a world of appalling inequality, which as yet neither philanthropy nor legislation has been able to remove. The lot of the working man who begins day labor at the age of sixteen and ends it at the age of seventy, who starts work every morning while the rest of us are still in bed, who has no sleep after his lunch and no vacation trip to Florida, is inconceivably hard. It is a sober fact that if those of us who are doctors, lawyers, professors and merchants were suddenly transferred by some evil magician to the rank of a working man, we should feel much as if we had been sent to the penitentiary. And it is equally a fact that we should realize just how much a glass of ale and a pipe of tobacco means to a sober industrious working man—not a picture-book drunkard—after his hours of work. It puts him for the brief moment of his relaxation on an equality with kings and plutocrats.

It is no use to say that tobacco shortens his life. Let it. It needs shortening. It is no use to say that beer sogs his oesophagus and loosens his motor muscles. Let it do so. He is better off with loose motor muscles and a soggy oesophagus and a mug of ale beside him, than in the cheerless discontent of an activity that knows only the work of life and nothing of its comforts.

The employers of labor have hitherto, through sheer shortsightedness, been in favor of prohibition. They thought that drinkless men would work better. So they will in the short spurt of efficiency that accompanies the change. But let the employer wait a year or two and then see how social discontent will spread like a wave in the wake of prohibition. The drinkless workman, robbed of the simple comforts of life, will angrily demand its luxuries. A new envy will enter into his heart. The glaring inequalities of society will stand revealed to him as never before. See to it that he does not turn into a Bolshevik.

Loud were the plaudits of the prohibitionists when Russia emptied its vodka into the Neva and declared itself bone-dry. Yet look at Russia now.

But when all is said and done there is little use in arguing or protesting against the new regime. The thing is coming.

We must obey our masters. Ho! then for the merry days that are coming; when the lemonade shall pop at the dry banquet and the sarsaparilla foam to the top of the glass; when two old friends shall sit down side by side with a bucket of ice water between them; when emergency cases shall be treated with a coffee bean, and wedding guests shall trip to the merry music of the Victrola filled with unfermented grape juice.

But what's the use of writing about it? None, that I can see. I call anybody who has read this article to witness that its tone is as fair-minded as open daylight and as kindly as a jug of red wine under a hawthorn tree. Yet I know by experience that it will bring nothing to the surface except unmeasured condemnation from the intolerant. The editor of this paper will receive perhaps threatening letters from Mothers' Meetings and Children's Blue Ribbon Societies for daring to print it. And for myself, the lawyers and judges and doctors whom I have quoted will say that they never heard of me, and that they never took anything stronger in their lives than raspberry vinegar. Never mind. Perhaps I shall be able to get work in Hayti or in Dutch Borneo or some sensible country.

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